

Rethinking Shelter:

An Analysis of Purpose, Policies, and Impact of the Ramsey County Family Shelter System



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

On any given night, Ramsey County has the capacity to shelter approximately 30 households in its two family shelters. The number of families on the shelter waitlist is typically twice as many and they wait, on average, one month before shelter space becomes available. Given this situation, Ramsey County, as the community partner of Resilient Communities Project (RCP), identified a need to understand how policies that support the day to day operation of the family shelter system impact a family's ability to access shelter, experience shelter, and exit shelter. This research project was conducted by a team of four graduate students at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs under the guidance of Dr. Maria Hanratty, and in partnership with community stakeholders.

Methods

This research project sought to:

1. Assess the level of shared community understanding regarding the purpose of family shelter in Ramsey County
2. Understand the impact of current county and shelter policies on families access to, stay in, and exit from family shelter, particularly through an equity lens

Methods included a literature review, assessment of existing county and shelter policies, interviews with key county and community stakeholders of the family shelter system, analysis of shelter waitlist and shelter data, and interviews with shelter residents.

Results

Lack of family shelter space in Ramsey County reflects a disconnect between values and resources

Community advocates as well as county and shelter staff unanimously agreed that families in need of shelter should have a safe place to stay. However, there was not shared agreement on what this should consist of or how to effectively deliver on this principle. A range of interventions were identified, including more shelter space, robust shelter diversion and prevention services, and increased housing opportunities. Stakeholders largely believed that it was a community responsibility to respond to this need, not solely Ramsey County's.

Lack of shelter space drives policies which result in unintended consequences

Data shows that only 27% of families who get on the shelter waitlist actually enter shelter. This is a reflection of demand for shelter space far outweighing the supply. Consequently, policies are created to manage this scarce resource. While many of these policies may have unintended consequences, three stand out: (1) the prioritization policy, (2) the call-in policy and (3) the length of stay policy. Stakeholders felt these policies lead to unnecessary bureaucracy, are not family-centered and effectively screen out people with additional barriers, especially mental illness.

1. Prioritization policy. Families referred by police or hospitals are considered Priority 1, and families verified by a third party as living in a vehicle, car, or outside are considered Priority 2. Of those given Priority 1 or 2, 49% eventually enter shelter while only 16% of families not prioritized enter shelter. This prioritization encourages systems involvement, places an additional burden on families to “prove” they are homeless in a time of crisis, and may in fact be missing families who are extremely vulnerable but unable to meet criteria for either priority.
2. Call-in policy. Families must call in each Monday to remain on the waitlist; if a family misses any two Mondays, they will be removed from the waitlist. Among all families removed from the shelter waitlist, 51% were for not complying with the call-in policy. Some stakeholders suggested a need to increase clarity, consistency and flexibility regarding this policy. There is interest in better understanding what happens to families that are removed from the list for not calling in, as it is currently unclear to what extent families are either self-resolving or still in crisis and in need of shelter, but unable to comply with the policy.
3. Length of stay policy. The average length of stay at each of the two shelters is nearly identical (60.0 days at Family Service Center and 61.3 days at Project Home) despite a length of stay limit (120 days) imposed at the Family Service Center and none at Project Home. Eighty six percent of families placed at Project Home stayed less than 120 days. Given these two data points, the time and energy spent enforcing and defending an arbitrarily set 120 day maximum length of stay policy appears to be not only a misuse of resources but may be unnecessarily harmful to the relatively few families who could benefit from a longer stay.

Lack of family-centered approach weakens sense of agency for residents

In general, the interviews reflected a sense that families and frontline staff have limited voice and access in developing or influencing shelter policy that is set at the county staff level. This weakens a family’s sense of agency as they are expected to comply with rules they did not have the opportunity to help develop and may have been established with a focus on shelter operational efficiency, not what is best for the family. Escrow policies, for example, require families to save money while in shelter is beneficial in theory but not flexible enough in practice. The policy is intended to help families save money for housing upon shelter exit, but it leaves residents with little money to pay bills and other expenses. Given there is no data to demonstrate whether or not families use their savings for housing related costs (the stated purpose of the policy), stakeholders felt this one-size-fits-all policy lacks a family-centered approach and may be more harmful than helpful for some.

Recommendations

Use Equity-Centered approaches to evaluate policies

- Given the vast overrepresentation of households of color in Ramsey County's homeless response system, use Equity-Centered Redesign Tools like human-centered design methods and racial equity toolkits to ensure policies are family-centered and address racial equity.

Shift policies to be more family-centered

- Provide more agency to residents, and identify ways to involve or shift decision-making to frontline staff and residents.
- Explore a progressive engagement model that would allow staff to develop an individualized plan for a family's length of stay in shelter.
- Target shelter access based on family need using a variety of data points and indicators rather than only system involvement or the HUD definition of homelessness.

Increase options for shelter-seekers that considers range of interventions and needs

- Increase and diversify prevention and diversion resources so that more families remain housed, and those in need of shelter might be able to avoid a shelter stay if at all possible.
- Increase shelter space, acknowledging that families have varying levels of need and that current shelter options are inadequate to meet the need.

Create shared ownership to solve these challenges with Ramsey County and the community

- Ramsey County cannot solve these problems alone. The Ramsey County Board of Commissioners should designate a Shelter Task Force that includes people with lived experience, government, non-profits, faith communities and philanthropy charged with identifying ways to leverage community resources to increase shelter options and provide external support and accountability for improving the shelter experience and outcomes.
- With a family-centered lens, use community resources to further research how to target existing resources and increase positive housing outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

In 2017, Ramsey County declared a commitment to better understand the causes of homelessness and addressing systemic barriers to achieve housing stability with a new strategic priority called “Stability Starts With A Place to Call Home.” In alignment with this strategic priority, Ramsey County, as the 2018-2019 community partner of the University of Minnesota Resilient Communities Project, proposed a research project focused on analyzing the family shelter system in Ramsey County.

On any given night, Ramsey County has the capacity to shelter approximately 30 families. The waitlist for shelter space is twice as long and the average wait time for families on the shelter waitlist is one month. Better understanding how the policies that support the day to day operations of the family shelter system impact a family’s ability to access shelter, how they experience shelter, and also their exit from shelter provided the foundation for the proposed project.

This project was conducted by a team of four graduate students, referred to as researchers in this paper, at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs, under the guidance of Dr. Maria Hanratty. It was made possible by the invaluable time, energy, and resources of county and community partners involved in the provision of family shelter and advocacy on behalf of households experiencing homelessness. Vitally, shelter residents contributed to the richness of this project by sharing their stories and experiences.

BACKGROUND

Ramsey County has two dedicated shelters for families experiencing homelessness, the Family Service Center and Family Place/Project Home. The Family Service Center, a building owned by Ramsey County and managed by Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis, can house up to 21 families, or 65 individuals on a given night. It is a 24 hour shelter, where families have their own bedroom and bathroom, and communal dining and living areas. Family Place/Project Home is a partnership of two organizations; one (Family Place) that provides day shelter at a site in the Lowertown neighborhood of St. Paul and the other (Interfaith Action of St. Paul) hosts Project Home, which provides families experiencing homelessness overnight shelter in St. Paul-based churches, rotating on a monthly basis. Family Place/Project Home can shelter 11 families on a given night. This unique partnership allows families to access services, goal-oriented case planning, meals, and basic needs during the day and a warm meal with a safe place to stay for the night.

Prior to 2014, families accessed shelter by repeatedly calling the shelter line until space was available, with Family Place/Project Home acting as a temporary holding place and until space at the Family Service Center became available. That system had limited capacity, significant gaps in responsiveness and services, and lacked the ability to efficiently track families in need of shelter. In 2014, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) mandated the creation and use of coordinated entry systems to centralize access to all homeless resources. Ramsey County partners from across the Continuum of Care rolled out their family coordinated entry system known as Coordinated Access to Housing and Shelter (CAHS).

Now, instead of needing to contact all the various housing providers or shelters inquiring for vacancies, families simply connect with one source, CAHS, to access homeless resources including shelter space at either the Family Service Center or Family Place/Project Home (which no longer serves as a temporary or overflow shelter, rather, is now a second shelter option for families experiencing homelessness). This new process not only allows for more reliable tracking of families requesting shelter, but illuminates the extent to which shelter space in Ramsey County does not match the reported need for it. Thus, Ramsey County manages what is known as the “shelter waitlist”; the names of families who need shelter that night, but since the two shelters are full, go on to a list in hopes of being contacted at some point in the future when a shelter space does become available. A number of policies dictate how the shelter waitlist operates and what families must do in order to maintain a spot on that waitlist. Additionally, once in shelter, families are held to policies and rules specified by the county and the individual shelter.

To that end, the purpose of this research project was to understand the impact of current county and shelter policies on a family’s ability to access, remain in and exit from family shelter. Given the disproportionate number of people of color experiencing homelessness, particular attention was paid to racial equity. This was accomplished through a literature review, assessment of existing policies, interviews with key county and community stakeholders in the family shelter system, analysis of shelter waitlist and shelter data, and interviews with shelter residents.

RESEARCH STRATEGY AND METHODOLOGY

This project was shaped by the following problem statement: Ramsey County does not fully understand how its policies impact families' experience on the waitlist, in shelter, and exit from the two county funded family shelters. In order to address this agreed upon problem statement, five research questions drove the methods and analysis for this project. The questions were developed at the beginning of the semester and further refined as the direction of the research sharpened over time.

1. What is the purpose of family shelter in Ramsey County?
2. What county and shelter policies currently exist that potentially impact a family's: ability to access shelter, length of time on the shelter waitlist and in shelter, shelter experience, reason for exit and exit destination?
3. How are county and shelter policies developed and implemented?
4. Is there any evidence these policies impact a family's: ability to access shelter, length of time on the shelter waitlist and in shelter, shelter experience, reason for exit and exit destination?
5. Does access to shelter, length of time on the shelter waitlist and in shelter, shelter experience, reason for exit and exit destination vary by demographics?

This research project sought to understand how policies impact families' access to, stay in, and exit from shelter, and how this impact might be felt differentially across racial groups. However, it became clear that in order to assess this impact, it was necessary to first understand how stakeholders conceive the purpose of family shelter in Ramsey County to determine the level of shared understanding driving the creation, implementation, and monitoring of the policies that inform the family shelter system.

Below are the five data collection methods used to answer these research questions.

Literature Review

In order to build upon the existing knowledge base of shelter policy, a literature review was conducted to inform the research questions and design for this project. Utilizing both the University of Minnesota Library online database, Google Scholar, and other locally conducted research papers on homelessness and shelter, a review of existing research was conducted on the purpose of shelter, on the impact of shelter and waitlist policies, and on whether shelter experiences differed between race/ethnic populations.

Review of Existing Policies

This data collection method was chosen to help the researchers answer the second research question: What is the scope of policies that exist, either from family shelters or from the county, which dictate the processes for shelter: how to access shelter space, how to stay in shelter, and what might trigger an exit from shelter.

Ramsey County provided copies of the written policies pertaining to the maintenance of the shelter waitlist and referral to shelter placement. Family Service Center and Family Place/Project Home provided copies of the written rules and guidelines for shelter residents of their respective shelters. Based on discussions with the Ramsey County project sponsors, and reinforced during qualitative interviews, the analysis was primarily focused on a subset of these policies that are believed by staff to have the most impact on families seeking and currently in shelter. These will be defined and discussed further in the Results and Analysis section of this report.

Stakeholder Interviews

In order to tap into the knowledge and experience of providers that are involved in the creation and implementation of policies related to the family shelter system, and to gain insight into how these policies impact the families seeking and in shelter, interviews with 13 stakeholders were conducted. Stakeholders were grouped into three categories: (1) Ramsey County staff involved in the family homeless response system, (2) shelter staff, both frontline and management, and (3) community advocates working directly with families to access and remain in family shelter. With assistance from the project sponsors, the researchers identified five Ramsey County staff, six shelter staff and three community advocates; all but one were successfully contacted and interviewed either in person or over the phone.

Resident Interviews

While the primary data collection method for this project was meant to be qualitative interviews with providers and advocates, it was clear that the analysis would not truly be representative of the shelter system without the voices of residents. Due to the time-limited nature of this project, and the potentially lengthy process of gaining approval from University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board for the researchers to conduct the interviews, Family Service Center staff agreed to conduct and record interviews with four residents on behalf of the researchers.

A set of five open-ended questions was developed and utilized as the main tool for this method. The questions were intentionally kept to a minimum to respect the time of the families and minimize the burden on the interviewer. The researchers provided the interviewer a detailed set of instructions, an audio recorder, and a brief training on interviewing technique. Family Service Center staff was responsible for the selection of families to interview but did not provide the researchers any identifying family information.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data was also seen as a necessary component to complete a thorough analysis of Ramsey County family shelter policies. To meet this need, Ramsey County staff provided de-identified shelter waitlist data stored in an excel spreadsheet, covering January 1, 2016 through December 31, 2018. The data received included dates of entry and exit from the shelter waitlist, the reason for removal or shelter placement information, as well as some demographic information for the head of household.

The shelter waitlist spreadsheet is a functional document used for managing the waitlist, and contains records of families coming off the shelter waitlist; for some families, they then requested to be put back on the waitlist the following day, or within a week or two. These episodes appeared to be indicative of a continuous period of shelter seeking. In order to better capture complete episodes of shelter seeking, records were grouped together if they were part of the same shelter waitlist “spell.”

A “spell” was defined by the researchers as beginning when a family was added to the shelter waitlist until the family either (a) entered shelter or (b) was taken off of the list and did not return to the list within 30 days. This means that while the number of entries onto the shelter waitlist may be undercounted in our analysis, the time spent on the waitlist is more reflective of the length of time families spend trying to access shelter.

The second data set utilized was de-identified data provided from the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) for shelter stays that occurred in Family Service Center and Family Place/Project Home during the time frame of January 1, 2016 through December 31, 2018. Records were collapsed by household identification numbers and shelter entry date resulting in 601 household shelter stays. Demographic data, homeless history, exit destination, exit reason, length of stay were included for each household in this data set. Some of the responses on HMIS data elements were missing for some families, resulting in smaller sample sizes for tabulations of shelter population characteristics.

Both shelters provided supplementary data from client files that provided detail on the policy violation that led households to exit shelter due to non-compliance. Because receipt of this data occurred after most quantitative analysis was done, and because of discrepancies between this data and the HMIS data on exits for “non-compliance with program,” analysis of this data is limited; with most of the results presented in the appendices.

STATA, a statistical analysis software program, was utilized to clean and pull descriptive statistics from the two data sets. STATA was used to understand what the data indicates about how long families are on the shelter waitlist, length of time in shelter, reason for exit, exit destination and how these elements may vary by demographics.

A merge of the waitlist and the HMIS shelter data was conducted to better understand the accuracy and quality of the data sets, as well as how these data sets inform the pathway from waitlist to shelter. The data sets were merged on a linking HMIS ID, which is required for households in the shelter database. For shelter waitlist households, their County ID (or MAXIS number) was supplied, which allowed Ramsey County’s Research and Evaluation staff to obtain social security numbers and use this, or date of birth, to identify an already existing HMIS ID for the head of household on the shelter waitlist. Because 294 shelter waitlist entries did not contain an accompanying HMIS ID, the researchers were not able to confirm whether these households entered shelter from the waitlist or not, and were dropped from the analysis of shelter waitlist data.

This merge also revealed inconsistencies in that 47 households recorded as not entering shelter on the shelter waitlist were found to enter shelter in the HMIS shelter data set. The reverse was

also true: 42 households recorded as having entered shelter in the shelter waitlist data set did not have a corresponding shelter entry in the HMIS shelter data within 30 days of exit from the waitlist. For purposes of the shelter waitlist analysis, shelter entry was defined as any household who had an HMIS ID and was recorded in the shelter waitlist as having entered shelter. Given the tabulations above, this definition should yield a very similar total number of shelter entries as would a definition based on HMIS data.

Project Limitations

Logistical Limitations

Given that this project had just three months to be completed, the time-restricted nature posed the greatest limitation on this project. Ramsey County staff provided a wealth of data and resources with which to work, but narrowing the scope of the project necessarily narrowed the methodology and analysis options. The researchers worked diligently with the project sponsors to narrow the scope of the project and methodology in such a way that the ensuing results and recommendations would be of best use to the community in future planning and policy efforts regarding family shelter.

Qualitative Limitations

The Ramsey County project sponsors identified key stakeholders for interviews, and though this list eventually expanded to include more frontline staff, it was still limited to only a small sample of people who Ramsey County considered their primary partners of, and advocates for, family shelter.

Similarly, Family Service Center was solely responsible for identifying and recruiting households for the shelter resident interviews, and it is unknown whether this group's experience is reflective of all or most shelter residents, especially because of the small sample size (four). Additionally, three of the four families had been vouchered directly into a motel stay during their time on the waitlist. Because this is not the experience of most families on the waitlist, their perspective could bias the results. Shelter staff were also responsible for conducting the interviews and though families were explicitly told their responses would have no impact on their shelter stay, some families may have felt compelled to censor their responses, knowing that they were speaking about their shelter experience to shelter staff while still residing in shelter.

Finally, and critically, only families who actually got into shelter were interviewed; absent from this review is the perspective of any family who is currently on the shelter wait list or who was on, but dropped off for any number of reasons.

Quantitative Limitations

The scope of this project was limited only to families who identified themselves to the county as seeking shelter, and therefore this report is not representative of all households in need of shelter in Ramsey County. Furthermore, because the 294 shelter waitlist entries without an accompanying HMIS ID were dropped from analysis, and the waitlist data was collapsed into

shelter waitlist “spells,” the numbers in this paper undercount of the true number of families seeking shelter in Ramsey County. Additionally, this report includes family counts for only the two shelters that Ramsey County partially funds, and does not comprise entrance to family shelters in other counties or domestic violence shelters.

This research was additionally limited by data quality issues between the shelter waitlist and shelter data set. As was reported, 47 entries that were recorded as not having entered shelter in the shelter waitlist database did appear in the shelter data set shortly after (within 30 days of removal from the waitlist), and nearly the same number (42) were shown in the shelter waitlist as having entered shelter, but did not have an accompanying shelter entry.

While HMIS data was considered to be higher quality, it held its own limitations. The HMIS exit form requests that shelters enter an “exit reason” for households, separate from exit destination, but the accompanying reasons are vague and overlapping. For instance, reaching 120 days in shelter might be coded as “completed the program,” “non-compliance with program,” or “reached maximum time,” according to shelter staff. While the shelters provided supplementary data from client files about residents who exited due to policy violations, the count of households in the supplementary data differed from the count of exits coded in HMIS as “non-compliance with program,” and there was not enough time to merge these data sets with the HMIS shelter data set to analyze further. Thus, analysis of these two supplementary data sets is limited to the appendices.

Lastly, due to time constraints of the project, our quantitative analysis was limited to a broad overview of key findings from the data. There is significantly more information that can be gleaned from these data sets, and the recommendations include additional areas to explore using this and other data sources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Family shelter is a place for parents and their children to seek refuge when they feel as though they have nowhere else to go. However, with limited funding and beds available, it becomes increasingly important to ensure that space is targeted to those with the most need, making it important to define the purpose of shelter. Across the literature, various purposes for shelter are identified. One study stated, “Family shelters serve a very important function. They are the first line of defense for poor families whose hold on housing has become tenuous or who live in unstable housing conditions...Shelters create a moratorium on those problems by providing temporary housing at little or no cost to the family” (Weinreb and Rossi, 1995).

Others argue that shelter should only be used as an absolute last resort. Culhane, Metraux, & Byrne (2011) proposed a prevention-centered approach to homelessness which prioritizes housing stabilization services that interface directly with a network of community based services, rather than a proxy system of support services that are located within homelessness facilities. This model suggests families seeking shelter services should face multiple phases of assessment and intervention, such as mediation with landlords, to prevent homelessness. However, when shelter services are deemed necessary, the model suggests shelter use should follow a service delivery model that increases intensity with time, with most people leaving relatively quickly, and fewer staying for longer, more expensive stays.

Given the multiple opinions regarding the purpose of shelter and the limited availability of its space and resources, policies are designed to inform how this scarce resource is utilized, and these policies necessarily impact how families access and experience the shelter system. These policies can determine the family’s length of time in shelter, experience while residing in the shelter, and/or the reason for exit and exit destination.

When shelter space is limited, some communities maintain a shelter waitlist which requires policies dictating how to enter the list, how to maintain a spot on the waitlist, and how to enter shelter. Lipsky (2010) articulated that while shelter waitlists are intended to “weed out” those who are no longer in need of services, it is possible that some individuals in need may not have the time or resources to follow procedures. In fact, Rosenheck & Lam (1997) found such delays in service provision present a significant barrier to service use in the homeless population, particularly among those with serious mental illness. Brown et al (2017) found that 22% of individuals on shelter waitlists stayed at least one night on the street or another public place not meant for human habitation while they were waiting for shelter. This suggests that procedural requirements such as waitlists and call in procedures to maintain a spot on the waitlist may reduce shelter accessibility among individuals with urgent shelter needs.

Brown et al. (2017) found that individuals on shelter waitlists report mixed feelings about their usage. Some shelter seekers reported rapid access to the shelter and satisfaction with the process. Many also felt the waitlist procedures helped shelter staff collect information about shelter seekers and created a more orderly and systematic shelter experience. At the same time, many also reported dissatisfaction with the wait time and the uncertainty about when space would become available.

Families who are able to enter shelter may find that shelters do not have adequate staffing to effectively address their needs. Gilderbloom et al (2013) find that family shelters have small

staff with varying degrees of experience, and high client to staff ratios. Weinreb & Buckner (1993) find that, “Little attention is given to background checks, training, education or prior work experience in shelter hiring decisions”. In addition, limited shelter budgets make it difficult to professionally train staff for effective client support, and unskilled workers are routinely asked to perform a wide range of services intended for trained and professional staff. This, added to high levels of stress and burnout make it difficult for shelters to retain employees (Weinreb & Buckner 1993).

Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that shelter policies affect shelter resident’s sense of control, and that living in a highly controlled environment creates more stress and burden on residents. Pable (2012) indicated that residents of a transitional shelter had a negative view of policies/circumstances such as non-operable windows and the inability to have personal time. This high level of oversight and control made residents feel as though there were not to be trusted. Pable (2012) stated there may be “some type of link between high-control living environments (brought on by considerable rules and schedules often necessary in transitional shelters for safety and predictability) and perpetuating a sense of helplessness in residents”. This is reflected in client reports of overcrowding, stress, child behavioral problems, and a “lack of personal control over their living situation.”

Finally, there may be differences amongst demographic categories in shelter and shelter experience. Wong et al (1997) found that those identifying as African American and as Hispanic in New York City both had, “a slower rate of exiting public shelter as well as a faster rate of shelter readmission, even when the effects of other variables are taken into consideration.” This indicates that race of the participant does indeed play a factor in the shelter experience for that person.

In summation, the literature documents the challenges of addressing the dual purposes temporarily housing those without homes and addressing other barriers that people are experiencing that relate to their housing instability. Shelters often do not have the resources to adequately alleviate people’s problems, despite the awareness that a household’s needs might extend beyond needing a place to stay for a short period of time. Additionally, while shelter policies and practices may make it easier for staff to administer the shelter, they can have negative effects on residents by limiting their sense of autonomy.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The results that follow detail what the research indicated about the families accessing or attempting to access the family shelter system in Ramsey County, and how policies impact this experience. The first section draws from County and shelter policy documents and stakeholder interviews to identify the current policies that impact a family's movement through the shelter system. Then the researchers draw from the quantitative data analysis to document the demographic characteristics of families on the shelter waitlist and or in family shelters, and to provide basic information about family experiences in these systems. The results then draw from both the qualitative and quantitative methods that supported the three key themes identified.

What county and shelter policies currently exist that potentially impact a family's movement through the shelter system?

Both Ramsey County and the two shelters, Family Service Center and Family Place/Project Home, have their own set of policies that guide shelter access, stay, and exit; these largely consist of behavioral expectations and logistical requirements of staying in shelter. Ramsey County's policies cover the process to be placed on the shelter waitlist, maintain placement on the waitlist, acceptance or rejection of a shelter referral, as well as explanations of the length of stay and escrow savings policies. The written versions of these policies were provided to the researchers, while contextual information about them was collected during qualitative interviews.

Because it was not feasible to analyze every policy authored by Ramsey County and the two shelters, the researchers, in consultation with the Ramsey County project sponsors, identified the following seven policies to include (one of which is a combination of several smaller policies). While there are certainly many other important policies, these were believed to have the most impact on families seeking and residing in shelter.

Waitlist prioritization policy: First priority on the waitlist is given to families with a documented health and safety risk, including referrals from police, hospitals, and historically, child protection.¹ Any family that is living somewhere not meant for human habitation that has been verified by a third-party professional is second priority.

Call-in policy: Families must call in to the shelter waitlist line every Monday to remain on the waitlist. Families that fail to call in more than two times are removed from the waitlist. These families may be added back on the waitlist but will be placed at the bottom of the list.

Shelter placement refusal and no show policy: Families that turn down a shelter referral or do not show up at the shelter once referred are removed from the waitlist. These families will be ineligible for the shelter waitlist for 30 days. A supervisor may use discretion if there are mitigating circumstances to consider.

120 day length of stay policy: Families residing in the Family Service Center can stay for a maximum of 120 days within a 12 month period. Families residing at Family Place/Project Home are not subject to a maximum length of stay policy.

¹ Child protection referrals were removed from the policy in late 2017.

Escrow/savings account policy: Both shelters have an escrow/savings policy that requires families to save a portion of their income, but they vary slightly between the two shelters. Upon exit, families receive all of the money they have saved during their shelter stay. No amount of their savings or income is expected to pay for their shelter stay.

Family Service Center: If the family chooses to participate in the Savings Plan, their stay can be extended up to 120 days within a 12 month period. A savings maximum is set based on fair market rent for the unit size needed for the family. Ramsey County is responsible for oversight of this savings program.

Family Place/Project Home: Families are allowed to save a maximum of \$5,000. If this amount has been reached, families are given up to 30 days to secure housing and exit shelter.

Shelter eligibility: Both shelters have criteria regarding criminal history, residency, and family composition that determine eligibility. Broad eligibility for both shelters include:

- A caregiver who is at least 18 years of age and spent at least one night in Ramsey County
- Families who have economic assistance open in Ramsey County. If economic assistance benefits are open in a metro county² that is not Ramsey County, families will be referred to that county's homeless response system and shelters.
- Families with at least one child who is either less than 18 years of age, or is under the age of 19 and a full-time student
- Households wherein at least one member meets MFIP citizenship requirements
- Households whose income is below 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines
- Households with less than \$1000 in liquid assets
- Households with a verified homeless status: by self or professional
- Households without open warrants and/or registered sex offenders
- *Specific only to Family Place/Project Home:* Individuals without a felony conviction in the last 10 years for a crime against a person.

“Other” shelter policies: Each individual shelter establishes their own set of rules and guidelines for shelter residents to follow while in shelter. These include rules regarding curfews, client behavior, supervision of children, meal times, food storage and laundry. Despite differences in individual policies across shelters, a number of themes arose in interviews both with shelter staff and residents with regard to specific shelter rules, especially mealtimes and food choices as well as a family's inability to bring in and store their own food. This will be discussed in more detail in the Results section.

² Metro county indicates the 7 county metro area including: Ramsey, Hennepin, Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Scott, and Washington counties.

Quantitative Results: What do we know about families served by the Ramsey County family shelter system?

Demographics of families on shelter waitlist

Our data suggest that 1187 unique households were added to the shelter waitlist between January 1, 2016 and December 31, 2018, for a total of 1623 shelter waitlist entries, indicating that some families enter and exit the shelter waitlist multiple times, even after accounting for instances, and collapsing data, when a family falls off, but returns to the shelter waitlist within the same 30 day time period.³

Of the families on the shelter waitlist, 80% were headed by a single adult, and slightly more than two thirds of the shelter waitlist households (69%) had one or two children.

Below, Table 1 shows that the racial demographics of the waitlist population differ significantly from the overall Ramsey County population, with households of color disproportionately represented. While 12% of the Ramsey County population is black or African-American, 69% of the shelter waitlist entries comprise black households. The reverse is true for white households, who comprise 68% of the Ramsey County population, but only 20% of the shelter waitlist population. Native Americans are also heavily overrepresented, making up only 1% of the Ramsey County population, but 5% of shelter waitlist entries.

Table 1: *Racial identity of shelter waitlist households vs. Ramsey County population*

Racial Identity⁴	Waitlist population	Ramsey County Population⁵
White	20%	68%
African-American/ Black	69%	12%
Native/ American-Indian	5%	1%
Asian American	3%	15%
Other (including 2 or more races) ⁶	4%	4%
TOTAL	1,602	550,210

³ This reflects the corrected data set, which removed 294 entries from the shelter waitlist that did not have corresponding HMIS IDs and whose exit from the waitlist could not be accounted for. Thus, this reflects an undercount of the number of shelter waitlist entries and unique households added to the waitlist in the time period.

⁴ 7% of the Ramsey County population is Hispanic, however this data is not collected for the shelter waitlist.

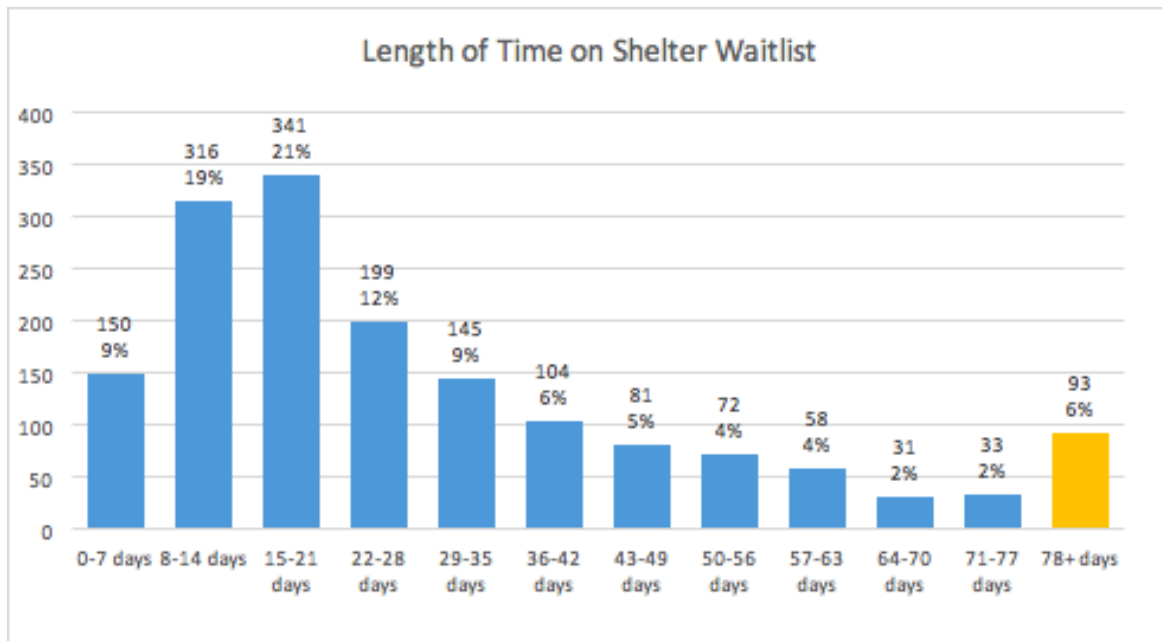
⁵ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/ramseycountyminnesota>

⁶ Other includes: Two or more races, and unknown.

Length of time on the shelter waitlist

The average waitlist episode lasts 30.1 days, and this average did not vary significantly by race.⁷ But, with a median of 22 days, it is clear that wait times skews shorter than the average. However, 6% of households are on the waitlist for more than 78 days, indicating these households have complied with policies well enough to retain their spot on the waitlist and are still in need of shelter 12 weeks after entering the shelter waitlist.⁸

Chart 1: *Length of time on the shelter waitlist (N= 1,623 waitlist entries)*



Reasons removed from the shelter waitlist

Once on the shelter waitlist, families are either removed once they are placed in shelter, or are removed for another reason. Table 2 details the frequency of these occurrences.

Just over a quarter (27%) of shelter waitlist entries result in households entering shelter, meaning that 73% of the time, households are removed from the shelter waitlist for another reason. Not complying with the call-in policy is the most common reason for removal from the shelter waitlist, and accounts for 51% of the exits from the waitlist. The next most common reason is shelter entry, at 27%, followed by being removed for not showing up to a shelter placement assignment (6%). These exit reasons and the frequency of these occurrences did not differ significantly by race.⁹

⁷ See Appendix 1

⁸ Analysis was not done on whether these households ultimately entered shelter or were eventually removed from the waitlist for another reason.

⁹ See Appendix 2

Table 2: *Reasons removed from the shelter waitlist (N=1,571)*

Reason for Removal	N	%
Entered shelter	426	27%
No call-in	805	51%
No show	102	6%
Diverted/found housing	69	4%
Not eligible	55	4%
Refused	66	4%
No contact	34	2%
Entered domestic violence shelter	14	1%
Total	1,571 ¹⁰	100%

Impact of prioritization on shelter entry

Households are prioritized for shelter space based on defined level of need. Priority 1 includes any household who has been referred by the police or hospitals, and Priority 2 includes households who have third party verification that they are staying in a place not meant for human habitation. The Ramsey County Shelter Team fills shelter space with Priority 1 or 2 households before providing shelter services to the remaining households on the waitlist. As a result of this, households who are prioritized for shelter space enter shelter at a much higher frequency than households who are not prioritized. Overall, 27% of households enter shelter from the waitlist, but Table 3 indicates that when broken down by prioritization, 49% of prioritized households enter shelter, but only 16% of unprioritized households enter shelter from the waitlist.¹¹

Table 3: *Impact of prioritization on shelter entry (N=1,623)*

Priority Level	Entered Shelter (N and %)		Didn't Enter Shelter (N and %)	
Priority 1 or 2	254	49%	266	16%
Not prioritized	172	51%	931	84%

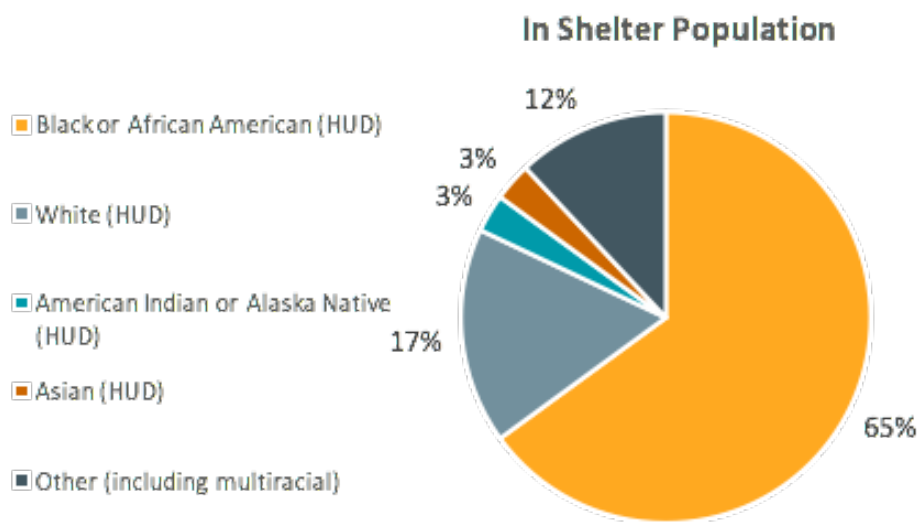
¹⁰ There are less than 1,623 entries in this analysis, because it reflects households who had not yet been removed from the shelter waitlist at the end of the reporting period, as well as households who had no removal reason recorded, even though a removal date was recorded.

¹¹ Appendix 3 details prioritization for shelter space by race, showing similar rates of prioritization across racial identities.

Demographic characteristics of families in shelter

The demographics of the families in shelter closely resemble the families on the shelter waitlist.¹² The average age of the head of household is around 33 years and the average number of children is 2.1. The race/ethnicity of the shelter residents is also fairly similar to that of shelter waitlist families. Chart 3 shows that 65% of families in shelter identify as Black/ African American, 17% identify as White, 12% identify as multi-racial or other, 3% identify as Asian and 3% identify as American Indian.

Chart 2: *Race/ethnicity of in-shelter families (N=601 households)*¹³



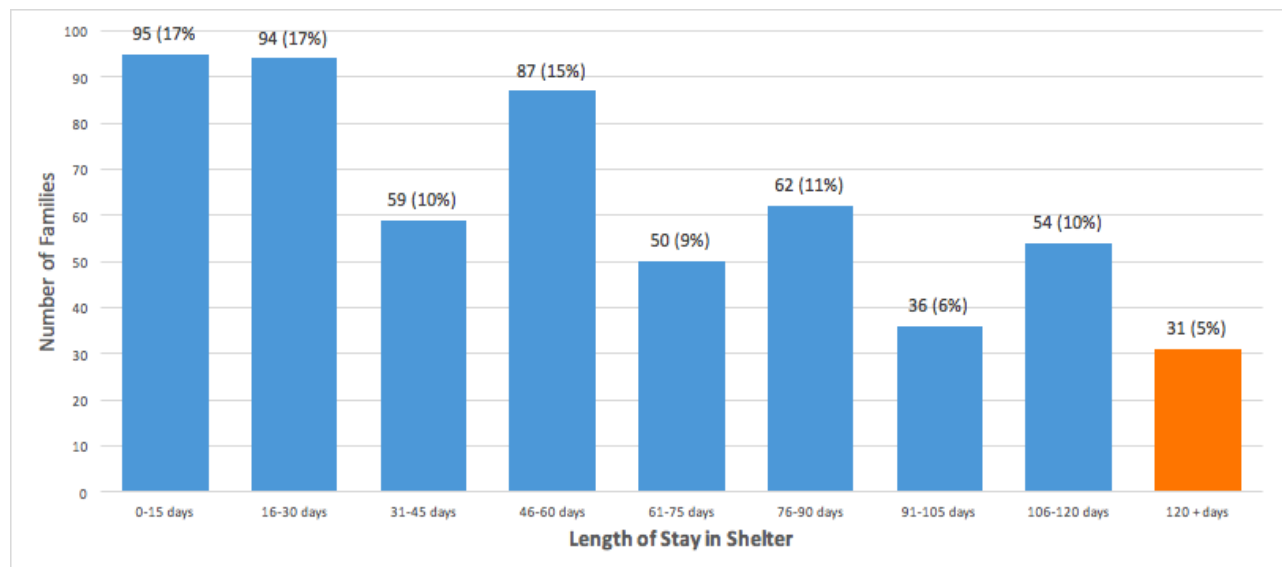
¹² The two data sets (shelter waitlist and HMIS shelter data) tracked race slightly differently. “Other” in the shelter waitlist comprises all multiracial households. In order to compare to shelter data, shelter race data in HMIS that was coded as multiracial or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (for which there was not a category in the shelter waitlist data) are combined to create the “other” category in Chart 2.

¹³ “Other” includes multiracial and “Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander”

Length of stay in shelter:

When looking across the two shelters, the average length of time for families in shelter in Ramsey County was 59 days with a range of 0- 226 days.¹⁴ As seen in Chart 4 below, 34% of families stay less than 30 days. Approximately 5% of families are staying longer the 120 days across both shelters. Only a very small number of families stay longer than 120 days at Family Service Center because that is the official limit, and families' stays are only extended if they are in the midst of an appeal with the county regarding their exit from shelter. At Family Place/ Project Home, there is not a limit on length of stay and about 14% of families stay longer than 120 days.

Chart 3: *Length of stay in shelter (N=568 households)*¹⁵



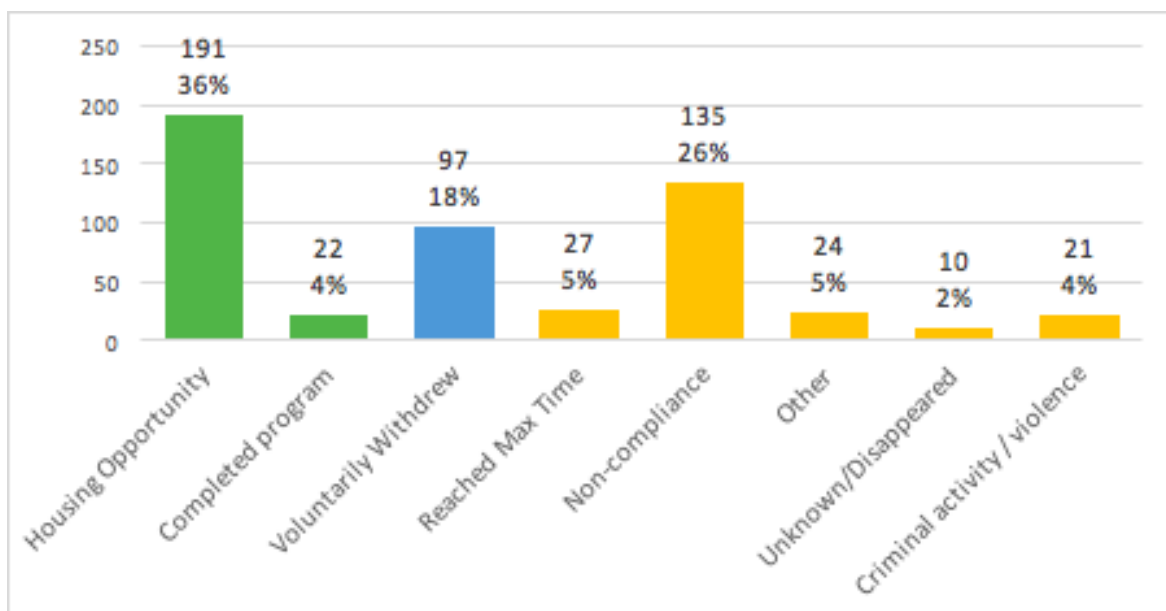
¹⁴ Appendix 4 details average length of stay in shelter by race

¹⁵ Only households with a shelter exit included in this analysis, which excludes 33 households in shelter at end of reporting period

Reason for Exit from Shelter:

Chart 5 presents tabulations of responses to the “exit reason” data element that is part of the HMIS exit assessment. According to the data, about 40% of families exited shelter for positive reasons including securing housing or completing the program.¹⁶ Approximately 18% exited voluntarily, and according to shelters completing data entry this may include reasons such as dissatisfaction with shelter policies or anticipation of the approaching time limit. The other 42% of families exited for more negative reasons including non-compliance with policies (26%) such as missing curfew or not saving correctly, reaching the maximum time limit (5%), criminal activity or violence (4%), other (5%)¹⁷ or unknown reasons (2%).

Chart 5: *Reason for exit from shelter (N=527)*¹⁸



¹⁶ According to shelter staff doing data entry, “completing the program” could refer to: incorrect codes for households who reached their 120 day maximum stay (a code exists for this exit reason), households who had housing pending but chose to exit shelter prior to entry to housing, or incorrectly coded as left for a housing opportunity

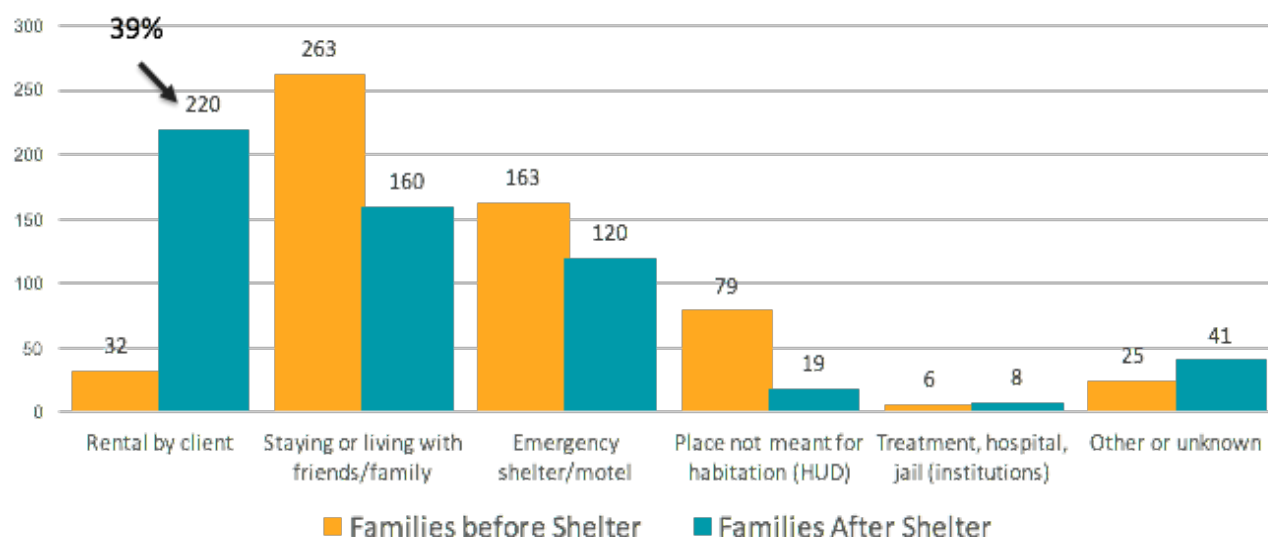
¹⁷ “Other” includes families that exited because they reached their maximum savings (miscoded), because of Child Protection Services (CPS) or drugs/treatment involvement, or because they moved to another shelter.

¹⁸ Only the 527 households with exit data completed for this question were included in this analysis.

Where are families prior to shelter and after leaving shelter?

Chart 6 shows information about where families were living before and after shelter. As shown, the number of families that were living in a rental increased significantly from 32 families (6%) before shelter to 220 (39%) after. This includes families exiting to market rate housing and families exiting to subsidized housing programs such as rapid rehousing or other rental supports. Despite this increase, the other 61% of families appear to exit to similar situations that they faced prior to shelter entry including staying or living with friends or family (28%), emergency shelter or motel (21%), and living in a place not meant for human habitation (3%). Thus, many of these families appear to be exiting shelter without fully resolving their housing crisis.

Chart 6: *Where families were before and after shelter (N=568)*¹⁹



¹⁹ Only households with responses for these questions were included in analysis. Categories were collapsed to create this comparison. Rental by client includes all rapid rehousing, transitional housing, and permanent subsidized and market rate housing; Emergency shelter and motel includes motel and hotel stays paid for by emergency shelter as well as by the household, other or unknown comprises unspecified other exits as well as data not collected.

Key Themes

Through the qualitative and quantitative analysis phases of this research project, the team of researchers discovered that the main results could be clustered into one of three general themes, discussed next.

The lack of family shelter space in Ramsey County reflects a mismatch between values and resources

The first stakeholder interview question asked for their thoughts on the purpose of shelter. The researchers chose this to be the first question because the collective answers would indicate whether or not there was a shared understanding for the purpose of shelter space in Ramsey County, which would help ground the research in the values that responders assigned to family shelter.

While those interviewed had a range of opinions on this issue, general themes arose, and common terminology was used across interviews. First, there appears to be both a primary and secondary purpose of family shelter, according to stakeholders. The primary purpose was typified by one stakeholder and echoed by others as, “To provide a safe place to stay. That is the primary purpose of shelter.” Other words that came up were, “safe haven,” “short-term,” “emergency,” and “last-resort.”

The secondary purpose identified by stakeholders included providing adequate support services for shelter residents. Stakeholders saw that once the immediate need for shelter was resolved, the shelter system should start addressing barriers families may be experiencing that contribute to housing instability. Two specific examples of this were addressing mental health issues and lack of financial resources to secure permanent housing.

Despite the limited family shelter space in Ramsey County, stakeholders almost universally shared the belief that families should have access to a safe place to stay if they need it. In a number of stakeholder interviews the Right to Shelter policy from the neighboring community of Hennepin County came up. This policy states that any family who presents without a place to reside is given immediate access to shelter (i.e. there is no shelter waitlist).

For the most part, the stakeholders believed that in theory, families in Ramsey County should likewise have access to a safe place to stay, but not necessarily that it should be a right and a resource provided by the county. Thus, there was disagreement amongst the stakeholders as to how to provide families access to shelter or needed supports via policy and funding streams. Identified ideas included adding shelter space, offering creative alternatives to adding emergency shelter beds, and increasing resources for diversion, prevention, and long-term housing opportunities.

While there was disagreement on how to address the full range of needs for this population, there was common agreement amongst stakeholders that resolving family homelessness should not be the sole responsibility of Ramsey County. In virtually every interview, stakeholders saw this as a

shared responsibility of the community as a whole, including those with lived experience, local government, social service agencies, the faith community and private sector entities.

Furthermore, the researchers identified a mismatch between the stated purpose of family shelter in Ramsey County and what seemed to be an expectation. As has been mentioned previously, when asked about the purpose of family shelter, stakeholders typically responded with talking about it being a safe place for families. However, there also seemed to be an implicit expectation among stakeholders that shelter should result in long-term housing. In contrast to shelter simply being a safe place to stay one stakeholder stated, “But what is the point of shelter if the time is limited and you exit shelter without having secured housing? The point of emergency shelter should be to end the emergency.” The data analyzed by the researchers indicated that only 39% of families exiting shelter end up leaving into rental housing, suggesting that in many cases families have not secured permanent housing at the time of shelter exit.

If the expectation of family shelter is to give families a place when they have nowhere else to go, then current policy development serves this goal by moving families relatively quickly into and out of shelter. But if the expectation of shelter is to move families to long-term housing, then this should be an explicit expectation, instead of an implicit one, and shelter should be structured accordingly.

Lack of shelter space drives policies which result in unintended consequences

The second theme that arose from our quantitative and qualitative results was that the lack of shelter space drives policies, and these policies have unintended consequences. The researchers determined three specific shelter policies created only because there was not enough shelter space: the prioritization policy, the call-in policy, and the length of stay policy.

1. Prioritization Policy

The first policy identified is the prioritization policy. As previously mentioned, this policy has two levels of prioritization where households referred by police and hospitals, or verified as staying outside are given priority. The inability to serve the total need of family homelessness and shelter seeking in the county has forced prioritization of available space as a means of managing this scarce resource. As one stakeholder said, “The challenge with Ramsey County ... because we have a waitlist, we have to figure out something”. Whether or not the current prioritization policy is working as it is intended is another question. This stakeholder followed up to say, “The way we’ve prioritized [families] has put a band-aid on a much larger problem by pretending it doesn’t exist.”

There are two main findings from Chart 1 that are relevant to this discussion. One is that only 49% of people actually being prioritized under this policy are entering shelter from the waitlist. The second noteworthy statistic is that only 16% of those on the list but not prioritized actually end up entering family shelter.

Stakeholders consistently stated that prioritization based on third party verification was a barrier to entering shelter. Many of those interviewed noted that asking people to prove they are

homeless can pose barriers , especially for families without social service connections. In addition, requiring households to obtain a third party verification that they are staying in a place not meant for human habitation can stigmatize families. As one stakeholder stated “Families describe it as ‘dehumanizing’ to have to drive over here to show their car to prove that it looks like they’re staying in their car.”

Stakeholders generally support a prioritization process, however, there was no general agreement on which types of situations should be prioritized and in what order. Additionally, the fact that the prioritization system encourages the involvement of police officers and potentially the criminal justice and child protection systems was considered problematic.

Clearly, the stakeholders do not see this policy as something that is working for the betterment of families experiencing homelessness. Relating back to the theme of unintended consequences, those created by this policy include forcing families to prove their homelessness in order to receive third party verification, and encouraging systems involvement with law enforcement and hospitals, and thus leaving an entire category (unprioritized) that has little chance of entering shelter, despite indications that many of these households may be in dire and vulnerable situations. One stakeholder spoke to this by saying, “Because they’re doubled up they’re automatically given a lower priority. But there can be violence, or it’s an unsafe situation, and children are living there.”

2. Call-In Policy

The second policy identified with significant impact on households seeking shelter that may have unintended consequences, is the call-in policy. Once again, families on the waitlist must call in each week in order to remain on the waitlist. As was shown in Table 2, failing to call-in was the number one reason to be removed from the list. The stakeholders consistently reported that this was a policy that appeared necessary only to manage the shelter waitlist, but that it created barriers for families to access shelter. One stakeholder reported that it “can be difficult to call in when you’re bouncing around. Especially in survival mode.” While others identified challenges with accessing a phone regularly, but many cited the pressures families are facing while experiencing homelessness. One stakeholder indicated that, “If I’m trying to think about my next move, trying to get my kids to school. I might not remember.” Another reported, “If you don’t call in...you’re homeless, you have so many other things going on, but they’re also trying to manage their belongings, looking for a place to go...that is a barrier. That is the biggest barrier.”

Ultimately, stakeholders report that families experiencing homelessness are in a state of crisis, on top of the stress created by normal family responsibilities. This can make it incredibly difficult for people to comply with this policy. Here, the unintended consequence is that families may be removed from the shelter waitlist for failure to call-in, not because they resolved their crises. As a result of this, families that are already in a stressful situation have been put under more stress.

3. Length of Stay Policy

The third policy identified with potential unintended consequences was the length of stay policy. Of the two shelters this policy only applies to the Family Service Center. As previously mentioned, the average stay of families in both shelters combined was 59 days.²⁰ With that said, roughly 60% of shelter residents remain in shelter for a length of time that is below that average. There are some families, a small percentage (5%), that stay in shelter longer than the 120 days, with most of these at Family Place/Project Home.

The maximum length of stay at Family Service Center was extended from 30 days to 120 days in 2014, which was seen by stakeholders as a positive change because it gave families more time in shelter to do what they needed to do in order to exit successfully. Most stakeholders seemed to accept that a maximum length of stay was needed, but lacked the conviction that 120 days was anything more than an arbitrary number set out of necessity. With that said, several acknowledged that 120 days is longer than some other shelters provide, and certainly longer than previous length of stay limit. Additionally, county and shelter staff highlighted that this four month period allows families to have shelter, rent free, and affords them the opportunity to put those saved funds into escrow to potentially use for future housing costs.

Because one shelter imposes a length of stay policy and the other does not, comparisons and impact of this policy was able to be examined. By shelter, the average stay at Family Service Center, where the policy exists, was 57 days while Family Place/Project Home, where the policy does not exist was 61 days. In fact, 86% of households that resided at Family Place/Project Home stayed less than 120 days. This means that with or without the rule that limits the time people stay in shelter, they are staying roughly the same amount of days.

This policy once again harkens back to the discussion on the purpose of shelter. The urgency of circumstances for the families on the shelter waitlist is not lost on Ramsey County. One stakeholder reported that, “For some people this is not enough time, but so many people need shelter, it improves our ability to help more people over time.” This is reflective of the fact that this policy is imposed not because this is the time households need, but because it is necessary to keep moving through the shelter waitlist. But the unintended consequence of this policy is that, “[When 120 days is up] they’re exiting into homelessness or another unstable situation.” Thus, it doesn’t reflect an intention for shelter to stabilize families’ housing situations. While this policy appears to be arbitrary for most households who do not stay the full length of time allotted, it may be exceedingly harmful to those families that need more time to stabilize.

Lack of family-centered approach weakens sense of agency

While the two shelters have made efforts to gather feedback from shelter residents and have included them in some policy revisions, this appears localized to the shelter level. Staff at both shelters reported shifting policies, when possible, based on the needs of families and feedback from residents. An example at Family Place/Project Home was offering a bedtime snack for

²⁰ It is important to note that this analysis did not include exploration of length of stay analyzed by exit reason. It is possible that non-compliance with policies may in fact be impacting this length of stay more than this preliminary research indicates.

children. Another example included shifting programming that the shelters offered. In particular, Family Place noted that several years ago they provided on-site life skills programming that was required for families that were not employed or pursuing education. However, they have eliminated that programming as a result of community feedback and because an increasing number of families in shelter were employed and not at Family Place during the day.

Despite these efforts, most stakeholders noted that shelter residents, stakeholders and even shelter staff, at times, are not involved and do not have a voice in the policy development process. There was a process in the past to bring some of the stakeholders together but these meetings reportedly no longer occur. Some stakeholders noted that these types of collective meetings might help the various groups feel like they are working together instead of against each other in supporting homeless families in Ramsey County.

The shelter's current policies and agreements also lack a deep reflection of a family centered approach. These are written from a compliance-based perspective that largely focuses on what the family must do to remain in shelter and identifies the myriad ways in which a family may lose their shelter. This deficit-based lens accentuates unfavorable behaviors and choices that families may make and offers a perception that the primary goal of shelter staff is to enforce these rules rather than positively support the families during their homeless experience.

One stakeholder reported that,

“[Residents] are so restricted- they're living so restricted and having to prove every single step. I can understand why they sometimes feel the way they're feeling. It's almost like we're the parents, they're the kids, or we're not even the parents, we're the aunts and uncles and we have to go to their parents to ask permission. But they don't feel that way, they tie us up with the County. And there's policies we can't even control for the building.... It's all these little things. So many logistical issues that make it hard for us as staff to effectively support our clients. Such a big chain before we can get an answer for them. It would be so nice to have one person to ask.”

This lack of a strength-based, family centered approach was further evident in the data collected during the stakeholder and family interviews. Each of the families, for example, acknowledged the need for existing shelter rules, but offered examples of rules and policies which seemed to be centered more on what might work best for shelter operations and less on what might work best for families.

Interestingly, some of the most frequently cited policies were not the major, complex ones; rather, they were the simple, more basic policies where families felt their opinions were being ignored, dismissed or not taken into account. These included the topics of room temperature, food and meals, the escrow policy, and proving need for shelter.

1. Room Temperature

At Family Service Center, families reported the room temperatures are controlled by the shelter and that, in the winter months, there is a non-negotiable room temperature maximum that is set

regardless of whether this temperature is sufficient for the family. One family offered the following experience, “Our room has been below 60 degrees and they don’t allow heaters in room ... They did give us extra blankets but they were handmade quilts that don’t fit my 6’5” son. We have 50,000 blankets on our bed but our room is still cold.” This example reflects a relatively inflexible policy enforced by staff who are trying to manage a heating budget, not families, controlling the room temperature and offering a solution (more blankets) that is not meeting the family’s needs as they are still cold.

2. Food/Meals

Policies relating to food and meals are what families cited most frequently when discussing challenging or frustrating policies to comply with; not being allowed to bring or store food in their rooms being the most difficult. Families stated that although they were aware of the rule prohibiting food in the rooms, it felt like an unrealistic expectation and some acknowledged breaking this rule. This seemed to underscore the finding that although the rule may be in place for a legitimate shelter operation purpose (i.e. food in the rooms may attract pests and rodents), it is unlikely to be universally followed thus positioning the family in a “no-win” situation that, if/when caught, increase their chances of being asked to leave shelter for not following the rules.

While families appreciated the food and meals provided by the shelter, they also spoke of the relatively limited timeframes in which those meals are offered. In some cases the misalignment was due to family preferences or routines (i.e. the family typically eats at a time outside of when the meals are provided) but one situation was due to circumstances outside of the family’s control. In this case, the mother of the family had physical disabilities which impacted the length of time she needed to prepare herself in the morning. In order to make it to the “breakfast hours” she had to wake up an hour earlier than everyone else, though she would have preferred an option to arrive later and still be able to receive breakfast.

The last food-related policy which families frequently spoke of was the lack of food options provided by the shelter. This was particularly challenging for families with younger children who may be more selective, or “picky”, in what they will or will not eat. One dad shared his experience of needing to buy food and meals for his kids because they would not eat what the shelter would offer. Not only did this require extra time and planning, it quickly depleted his personal allowance under the escrow policy.

Each of these food/meal related policies have real impact on families and while each one may make sense or have a logical reason for having it in place, it stems from what is best or most convenient for shelter operations rather than stemming from what is best of most convenient for families.

3. Escrow

Perhaps one of the more polarizing policies explored was the Escrow Policy. After researching how other shelters in Minnesota and across the country established policies regarding income, Ramsey County staff wanted to offer an alternative model to requiring residents to pay for shelter and/or requiring the use of Emergency Assistance. Additionally, they wanted to support

the likelihood that residents could be in a financially strong position to afford housing related costs (i.e. application fees, security deposits, first month's rent, etc.) upon exit. Thus, they recommended the escrow policy which requires that, after setting aside a spending allowance, all income be deposited into an escrow account held by county staff. This would continue until either the family has saved enough money to reasonably afford a rental unit, or they have reached the 120 day stay limit.

Almost unanimously, stakeholders and residents at least understood, if not agreed, with the theoretical rationale behind the escrow policy. However, there were varying opinions as it relates to its actual value, operational efficiency, and implementation of the policy. Some stakeholders wondered what the average escrow amount was upon exit, and more precisely, questioned whether or not the funds were eventually used for housing related expenses at all.

In interviews with residents at Family Service Center, none of the families suggested removing the escrow policy. However, there was not universal support for it either. Most families acknowledged the value of the concept, but felt that the implementation of it was too rigid, such as not being able to make financial choices for themselves, not having enough "living expenses" to be able to pay for things like cell phone services (thus losing access to things like connecting with friends, family and network support), and not being able to provide food options to children as an alternative to the limited meals provided at the shelter.

Some of the community advocates also wondered whether the rigid implementation of this policy was disproportionately impacting people living with mental illness. They wondered what special accommodations were being offered to people living with mental illness to fully understand, interpret and consistently comply with the policy. They also wondered what trainings or supports are offered to staff to manage these situations appropriately and whether people living with mental illness disproportionately exit from shelter for non-compliance with such rigid policies?

In addition to the rigidity of this policy, both county staff and community advocates acknowledged the administrative burden it requires to operate an escrow program. While county staff seemed to accept such a burden as simply part of doing business, the community advocates generally disagreed and suggested the benefits of administering it may not be worth the opportunity cost. One example cited an instance when the escrow policy required 23 pages of documentation for one income deposit and consumed many hours of staff time to make this happen.

Lastly, some questioned not only the long term value of a forced savings plan, but whether or not it is the role of shelter to impose such practices. County staff stated that the escrow policy originated as an alternative to having families pay or use their Emergency Assistance for shelter and also to ensure families has financial resources to secure housing upon shelter exit. However, data is not maintained to determine whether or not this intended purpose is being achieved.

4. Worthiness

Families shared that seeking publicly funded shelter was the low point in their lives. They used these words during the interview that represent the emotional state these families were/are experiencing: “suicidal thoughts”, “giving up”, “depressed”, “anxiety”, “broken down”, and “overwhelmed and ashamed”. The words reflect a great sense of loss and desperation. When families fall through the cracks to the point that they are present at a homeless shelter, their sense of self-worth and value has already been drastically diminished. It can be a humiliating experience when they are asked to continuously prove that they are really homeless or really have no other housing options. One family framed it in the following way, “I had to get down to my last straw in order for the county to help.” This deficit based policy not only requires families to verify they have no other options, but requires them to prove they are worthy of the most basic human need of all, shelter.

DISCUSSION

Similarities Between Literature and Results

In the interviews with family shelter stakeholders and shelter residents, there were several themes that were consistent with the prior literature. As in prior research, most stake-holders noted that the primary purpose of shelter was to provide housing to those who do not have access to it, while others saw the importance of the provision of services to address other issues such as long-term housing stability.

On a similar note, while both interviews and prior literature find that one of the purposes of shelter is to provide support services for non-housing related barriers that residents face, both find that shelters typically do not perform well in this regard. Support services provided are usually designed as one size fits all, and cannot be tailored to the needs and personal experiences of an individual family.

Many of the stakeholders mentioned that the rules are far too rigid, while sources discussed how this enhanced level of rigidity and control can harm families because they are not able to establish comfortable routines. Three out of four of the families brought up the subject of the rules and noted that the shelter system feels punitive to them. Typically, they understood that certain rules need to be in place to keep order, but that the current structure made them feel like inmates in a prison. They brought up having feelings of being overwhelmed and ashamed and that this extreme emotional state made it difficult to comply with the complexity of rules at the shelter. Instead of receiving more levels of support when they are not able to meet the expectations of the shelter, they are met with punishment. Sometimes this punishment is being asked to leave shelter.

As a matter of specific policy, one recurring theme in the stakeholder interviews was in regards to the 120 day limit stay in family shelter. The literature noted that these policies exist because of a shortage of funding and resources. Overwhelmingly, those interviewed stated that the reason for the policy is that they have to limit the number of total days for each family in order to help as many people as possible and cannot continue helping everyone for as long as they need. This is a reflection of a resource shortage, and thus an inability to provide adequate support for everyone.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ramsey County has already committed to addressing many of the challenges identified in this study as part of the *Stability Starts with a Place Called Home* initiative. The researchers saw it necessary to come back to the original goals of this key strategic priority to ground the recommendations.

Stability Starts with a Place Called Home is aimed to improve access to safe, stable housing and reduce homelessness by effectively engaging with residents and partners and maximizing coordination and leadership within and across county departments and programs. Ramsey County acknowledges safe shelter is a basic need in order to reach the vision that Ramsey County is a vibrant community where all are valued and thrive.

They also acknowledge that,

Racial Equity must be applied: Discrimination and racism in private sector housing market and public policies contribute greatly to the current inequity in housing status in the county and nation-wide. Ramsey County is the only county in the metro region where the cost of living for residents exceeds a middle-income household of a family of four. Racial disparities are even greater when poverty rates are disaggregated between people of color and non-Hispanic whites. Recognizing the need for greater system reform to achieve housing stability for all, we must work across the county and with external partners to identify and eliminate barriers to housing. A focus on racial equity must be integrated more effectively in all the work being done.

Given the County's recognition that this strategic priority must focus on racial equity, the researchers chose to use a racial equity lens as they made recommendations. As Ramsey County continues to explore the recommendations that follow they should consider how they can use similar tools to ensure they are applying a racial equity lens in program improvements and systems change. The below questions are a modified framework adapted from the Government Alliance for Racial Equity (GARE).²¹

- How have stakeholders been involved in decision-making? Are there opportunities to expand engagement?
- What does available data and your conversations with stakeholders tell you about this issue? Where is data missing?
- Who could be impacted by the issues related to this recommendation? Who would benefit and who would be burdened?
- Are there potential disproportionate impacts on a particular group of people?
- If a demographic group is negatively impacted by the proposed action, what is your proposed plan for identifying additional actions to address the potential inequities?

²¹ Nelson, Julie & Brooks, Lisa, "GARE Racial Equity Toolkit" https://www.racialequityalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/GARE-Racial_Equity_Toolkit.pdf (Dec. 2016)

These questions both guided the recommendations found below and can be used as Ramsey County staff and community stakeholders consider implementing any of the below recommendations.

Shift policies to be more family centered

Perhaps the most profound impact Ramsey County could make would be to revisit its core policies with a family centered lens; to ground itself in the perspective of what families need and how to empower them to the greatest extent possible. This recommendation is not to redesign all policies to please families or do whatever they ask, rather, it suggests to reexamine policies *first* from the lens of what families say they need *then* from the lens of what is feasible for shelter operations. County staff could identify ways to further and more meaningfully involve or shift decision-making to families and frontline shelter staff. Areas for consideration include:

- Create resident feedback sessions where families could help identify challenging policies and co-create solutions to address them (i.e. room temperature regulation, food/meal policies, et.)
- Engage former residents to have input *and* influence on the language used in shelter policies
- Develop individualized escrow plans where families are supported to save at a pace that is appropriate given their circumstances

This kind of tailored engagement should also be applied to the current length of stay limit at the Family Service Center. Ramsey County should eliminate the one-size-fits-all, 120 day maximum stay. This arbitrary limit not only offers the perception to all families that “they get” the full 120 days when they may not need that much time, it also cuts off the families (31 in this study) who are not ready to successfully exit shelter. There should be guidelines in place that supports the shelter staff and families to co-create customized shelter stay and housing plans that fit the unique circumstances of each family; progressively managing the balance of providing too little or too many resources. This approach seem realistic as the average length of stay at the two shelters is 59 days and only 31 (5%) of families exceeded 120 day over the two years period of this study. These results follow the national trend that indicates most people leave shelter relatively quickly, and fewer stay for longer, more expensive stays.

Increase options for shelter seekers that considers range of interventions and needs

On any given night in Ramsey County, 90 families are known to need shelter. With the limited capacity of 30 family shelter beds, that leaves 60 families each night without proper shelter that have identified and reported this need to the county. And this does not include the 73% of families who, at one point, were on the shelter waitlist but then exited for unknown reasons. This data highlights the fact that there are more housing demands than resources available. While no one solution or strategy will solve homelessness for all families, robust options to prevent, divert, and shelter families is the strongest three-pronged approach available. Given this reality, Ramsey County should:

- Prevent homelessness from occurring to the greatest extent possible. Prevention is often seen as the most cost effective approach and, just as importantly, protects the family from the traumatic experience of entering the homeless system.
- Divert families from actually entering the shelter system to the greatest extent possible when homelessness can't be prevented. Communities across the country are becoming increasingly creative in developing effective, non-traditional approaches to shelter diversion. Bolster existing shelter diversion efforts with more robust resources.
- Be able to provide shelter to all families who need it. To align with the espoused values of nearly every staff, stakeholder and advocate interviewed, adequate shelter must be provided to families at the time they are seeking it.

If providing shelter to families at the time they need it cannot be achieved, thereby necessitating a shelter waitlist, Ramsey County should reevaluate its prioritization policies. The waitlist data shows that families who are “system-involved” (Priority 1) or who are connected to a social worker that can verify literal homelessness (Priority 2) have a far greater chance of getting shelter (49%) than those who don't (16%). While this does reflect effective targeting, it is unknown if this truly is the population Ramsey County wants to be serving; and if it is, why? Given this, Ramsey County should:

- Use data to determine, then clearly state, who the priority population is for family shelter
- Develop the proper assessment tools that will ensure the priority population can be consistently identified
- Research what resources and staffing levels are required to most effectively serve the priority population and ensure they exit to permanent housing
- Provide funding to support the proper shelter model

Create shared ownership to solve these challenges with Ramsey County and the community

A consistent theme of the interviews was that the crisis of family homelessness is a community problem that needs to be solved by stakeholders within and beyond Ramsey County. As one stakeholder noted, “I think we're trying. We're all trying. We all come with the same purpose. The way we approach that may be different. But we're all in this work together.”

Shift decision making and policy development when possible and share accountability

The limited involvement of frontline staff and families in decision making has led to policies that are not family centered. These strategies are often working for the system that implements them more than those they impact. From a racial equity standpoint, stakeholders that are directly impacted by the policies should be involved in the creation of those policies when possible. In order to create a more aligned and family-centered system, county and shelter staff should regularly come together to discuss what is working, review data, give feedback on policy changes and discuss implementation of new efforts. When possible, this group should gather information from shelter residents and/or pay former shelter residents to participate in meetings to provide feedback.

Use additional research and data to drive responses

As Ramsey County deepens its work to improve the family shelter system, it will be critical to do additional research and collect and respond to data to drive these changes. Additional research is needed to inform changes to the prioritization policy. In particular, it will be critical to more deeply understand the situation of families that are “unprioritized”, in order to critically assess how to prioritize shelter. Roughly 70% of the households that enter the shelter waitlist are not prioritized, and are therefore significantly less likely to enter shelter because of an assumption that families coming from hospitals, referred by police, or verified as staying in a place not meant for human habitation are in more vulnerable situations. However, the true experience of the families in other situations is unknown and at times may also be deeply unsafe for families. Further analysis would support developing a more appropriate prioritization system as well as clarifying types of lower-intensity supports that may be needed. A new waitlist outreach program started by Ramsey County may be able to collect some of this data.

Additional research is also needed to understand what happens to families that fall off the shelter waitlist, and in particular for those that fall off for not calling in. The call-in policy was the most common reason for removal from the shelter waitlist, with 51% of exits due to failure to call-in. The assumption is often that these families have resolved their housing situation, however, in reality there is no current data to support this assumption. It is worth further analysis to understand what happens to these families and ensure that the call-in policy is not creating an additional barrier for families when their housing crisis remains unresolved.

It would also be beneficial to further analyze where resources are most effective in supporting families. This could include a cost-benefit analysis of building more shelter to address the reported need for shelter, in comparison to shifting those funds to long term supportive housing, or alternative prevention and diversion resources. It may be particularly useful to further analyze the costs of the cold weather motel program, which houses families verified as staying in a place not meant for human habitation in motels over the winter, until space in formal shelter opens up. Some form of cost-benefit analysis could be performed to ascertain whether or not the motel program is worth the amount of money being spent on it or if resources would be more effective if spent in another way in service to households in need of shelter.

Finally, the researchers did not have the capacity to perform a thorough analysis on the exit destination data that was provided by the county and the shelters. This most definitely needs to be explored, particularly if the county determines that the goal of shelter is to exit families to stable housing. In fact, the data indicated that only 39% of those who exit from family shelter, do so into rental housing. Because of the implementation of coordinated entry in 2014, analysis of exits to housing from shelter should be explored in conjunction with coordinated entry data, to inform how these systems are or are not supporting each other.

Appoint and implement a shelter task force

The fact that Ramsey County feels responsible for solving family homelessness alone seems to cause additional problems. At times public accountability can cause government entities to minimize problems for fear of negative public perception. However, Ramsey County cannot

solve these problems alone. Given the resounding assertion in stakeholder interviews that the community as a whole should be responsible for addressing lack of family shelter space and homelessness in Ramsey County, efforts should be made to join together agencies and entities with a vested interest in addressing this crisis.

The Ramsey County Board of Commissioners should designate a Shelter Task Force that includes people with lived experience, government, non-profits, faith communities, and philanthropy charged with trying to identify ways to leverage community resources to increase shelter options as well as provide external support and accountability for improving the shelter experience and outcomes. Given the sometimes siloed approach to shelter for different populations (i.e. families, single adults, foster care youth), the county should consider whether this group should be focused only on families or look across populations.

Use human-centered redesign and equity toolkits

As stated earlier, it is critical that any groups undertaking these policy changes use an equity lens. The teams listed above should be trained in equity tools/toolkits and consider how they can use these tools to support stakeholder engagement, identify populations that may be disproportionately burdened, and consider ways to mitigate harm or any unintended consequences of policy shifts. The Government Alliance for Racial Equity has a variety of resources available to support such efforts.

While the recommended Shelter Task Force should focus on the macro challenges identified such as shelter space, they could work with shelters to identify some quicker and more actionable policy changes such as redesigning the Escrow or prioritization policy. They should explore ways to use equity focused human-centered redesign methods as a way to involve frontline staff and “end users” in that process. For example, if the team focused on the Escrow policy they would gather additional information through the “empathy” stage to understand from families and frontline staff what is working about the policy and what is getting in the way. They could then work to come up with new ideas and prototype the solutions, testing on the new approach with just a few families. In this way, the policy could be redesigned by testing and getting feedback instead of making large changes that could have unintended consequences.²²

²² Additional resources can be found from <http://publicpolicylab.org/>, <https://dschool.stanford.edu/programs/designing-for-social-systems> or the <http://futureservicesinstitute.org/>

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, whatever recommendations Ramsey County undertakes it is clear that there is an immense shortage of shelter relative to the number of families reporting a need for shelter. A system constrained by scarce resources responds to this shortage by managing access to the resource, which necessarily results in unintended consequences. This report provides a preliminary exploration of the impact of these policies on the families accessing, and trying to access shelter in Ramsey County, and it is evident that while the policies may be working for the purposes of managing a shelter waitlist and limited shelter space, they are not necessarily working for the families in shelter, or trying to access shelter. As evidenced in the stakeholder interviews as well as in recent media coverage by Melo (2019) and Shockman (2019) of this crisis, there is sufficient community support for addressing this problem. This appears to be a critical moment and a real opportunity for Ramsey County to capitalize on this widespread support and interest in addressing this issue by leveraging existing and new resources and community partnerships to truly respond to the needs of families experiencing homelessness.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: *Average length of time on shelter waitlist by race*

Race	N	Average Length of Waitlist Spell (days)
Asian ²³	21	19
African American/Black	1,097	30
Native/American Indian	80	34
White	314	30
Other ²⁴	64	30
Total	1,576 ²⁵	30

²³ While average length of time on waitlist for those identified as Asian appears to be lower, without a larger sample size or further analysis, the researchers are unable to draw conclusions based on this.

²⁴ Including multiracial, unknown, and other

²⁵ Does not take into account households still on the shelter waitlist at the end of the reporting period, or those for whom the racial identity question was not completed

Appendix 2: Reason removed from shelter waitlist by race

Reason Removed	Asian		African American/ Black		Native/ American Indian		White		Other		Total (N)
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Not eligible	2	6%	36	5%	2	3%	12	5%	2	5%	54
Diverted/f ound housing	1	3%	46	6%	4	7%	14	6%	3	7%	68
No call-in	28	80%	557	72%	41	71%	138	63%	31	70%	795
No contact	1	3%	14	2%	1	2%	17	8%	1	2%	34
No show	2	6%	68	9%	4	7%	22	10%	4	9%	100
Refused	1	3%	45	6%	5	9%	13	6%	1	2%	65
Domestic Violence Shelter	0	0%	7	1%	1	2%	4	2%	2	5%	14
TOTAL (N)	35		773		58		220		44		1,130

Appendix 3: *Prioritization on shelter waitlist by race*

Race	Priority 1		Priority 2		Not Prioritized		Total
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Asian	2	4%	9	19%	36	77%	47
African American/Black	54	5%	302	28%	741	68%	1,097
Native/American Indian	5	6%	23	29%	52	65%	80
White	10	3%	88	28%	216	69%	314
Other ²⁶	6	9%	13	20%	45	70%	64
TOTAL	77	5%	435	27%	1,090	68%	1,602

Appendix 4: *Average length of stay in shelter by race*

Race	N	Average Length of Stay (Days)
Asian	12	59
African-American/Black	372	61
Native/American Indian	19	49
White	98	54
Native Hawaiian	3	34
Multiracial	64	57
TOTAL	568	59

²⁶Including multiracial, unknown, and other

Appendix 5: *Exits to stable housing by race*

Race	(N) Exit to Housing Opportunity	(%) Exit to Housing Opportunity
Asian	5	42%
African-American/Black	144	39%
Native/American Indian	9	47%
White	35	36%
Other (including 2 or more races)	27	40%
TOTAL	220	39%

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